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ABSTRACT

Educational psychologists and researchers attest to the importance of play in learning, but studies indicate that children are playing less, and often less effectively, justifying the need for play within the school curriculum. The area of language arts is a natural place for imaginative play. One elementary school project incorporated playing, acting out roles, with a good deal of talking and writing. To begin the project, the fifth and sixth grade students built an actual replica of an 1880 town and its geographical surroundings. Each child then invented and described in writing one or more town residents whose roles they would play for the rest of the project. To encourage these characters and their relationships, a post office and mailcarrier were devised and students wrote a letter from their character to any other character in the room. As the plots grew more complex, a newspaper was established. Eventually, the headlines read that the town's mayor had been kidnapped, and later ransomed, and letters to the editor poured in when a railroad threatened to overtake the town. Town meetings on these subjects also flourished. By the second half of the project, there were times when the line between reality and fantasy nearly disappeared. While this project was not exactly "free" play, the goals of writing, speaking and use of the imagination were accomplished with great success. (HTH)

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IMAGINATION:
THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WRITING AND PLAY

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"Imagination: The Connection between Writing and Play"

"Let not young souls be smothered out before
They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.
It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull,
Its poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed..."
Vachel Lindsay

There was once a group of children stranded on an old boat at sea. Attacked by pirates, their defense was reckless and heroic. In the midst of the struggle, the youngest child fell overboard. "A whale, a killer whale!" the lookout suddenly cried. Climbing to the edge of the boat, one of the boys motioned everyone else away. "I'll save her!" he roared, diving into the waves.

As a young teacher witnessing these "quaint deeds" on the playground of my first school, something about children, education, and schools crystallized for me. The energy, excitement and involvement I saw in that game ought to be happening inside the classroom too. Here was a tremendous resource for education, lying virtually untapped.

Albert Cullum, I was to discover later, had been tapping this particular resource for years. In his book, Push Back the Desks, he describes a teaching strategy which makes use of the enthusiasm and energy present on that stranded ship. His method was to infuse an element of imaginative or dramatic play into the activities in his classroom. In social studies, one of Mr. Cullum's fifth graders "becomes" Teddy Roosevelt and gives his State of the Union address to the assembled congressmen. In geography, first graders "climb" the Rocky Mts., "swim" the Mississippi, and fill canteens for the "trip" across the Mohave Desert. In poetry class, lights are dimmed and, in the quiet

presence of a pot of dry ice, one of the girls calls up the spirit of Edna St. Vincent Millay. In project after project, Cullum reports the intense emotional involvement of the children, the enthusiasm, the excitement, and above all, how much they learned. Cullum harnessed the power of play.

Piaget, Freud, and Bettelheim, along with many others, attest to the importance of play, and particularly dramatic or imaginative play, in the development of children. Links have been drawn between play and several developmental areas: cognitive growth, language acquisition, problem solving and socialization. Freyberg (1973) notes that,

> "Marshall and Hahn (1967), Smilansky (1968) and the present investigator have successfully engaged in training imaginative play in young children and observed gains associated with cognitive development."

In a study by Pellegrini (1980),

> "A significant main effect of play on language achievement was found. The means for social dramatic play were significantly larger than means for both of the other play categories."

Lee Y. Martin (1978) comes to similar conclusions in the area of problem solving. These studies and more point to the fact that play has an effect on learning. As Götz (1977) puts it, "It is through play that much of the work of childhood is done."

If play is crucial to learning, does it follow that we have to have it in the classroom? Don't children get enough of it at recess and at home? Bonnie Tyler (1976) writes,

> It is generally assumed that everybody knows how to play and everybody wants to play. Unfortunately, neither of these assumptions is true, particularly for imaginative or creative play...Clearly, spontaneous, imaginative play does not come naturally to children but is to a large extent influenced by their immediate surroundings and the adults close to them."

Research shows that today's children, at least in part because of television, are playing less and less. It also shows that children from deprived backgrounds play far less effectively than their more privileged peers. Burton White of Harvard found that middle-class children engaged in role-playing or dramatic play five times more often than lower-class children.(Pines, 1969) The need for play in school, even a kind of teaching of play seems clearly justified.

The area of language arts is a natural place to incorporate imaginative play into the curriculum. The link between play and language learning is clearly documented. Also, language arts, if taken to mean primarily "writing," is a subject in which we especially want to encourage children's imagination.

Following this reasoning, I chose to take something like that scene of bravery on the high seas and plunk it down in the middle of my language arts class. I wanted to provide an opportunity for the children to create an indoor "play" in which they lived and breathed their roles just like on the playground. The difference would be that the playing would be physically more controlled, with some acting out, but also a good deal of talking and writing that would grow out of the story the children were creating. In this way, I hoped to encourage play, particularly imaginative play, and to encourage writing. In fulfillment of these two goals, the project, "The Town", was born.

To begin the project, we built an actual replica of a town and its surroundings. The first step was to plan the geography of the town. Were there mountains nearby? Was there a river, an ocean, a desert? Were there farms on the outskirts? Physical

features were painted onto a large piece of cardboard or built up with paper maché. All the landmarks were given names so that later on we could talk about places in and around the town without confusion. Once the setting was established, the children decided on a time frame. Evergreen Valley, created by a group of third through sixth graders, was set in the United States around 1880.

What should be in the town? In Evergreen Valley, keeping in mind the date and the setting, the children built an opera house, hotel, school, post office, pet shop and general store... several family homes, two fairy huts, and a volcano, residence of one of the town's witches. They constructed these mostly out of small cardboard boxes, paper and paint, and set them down along the town square and the country roads they had drawn on the cardboard ground. Having this model was a vital part of the playing that came later. It helped the children envision the world they were creating and gave them something concrete to play with. They embellished the town as time went on, adding buildings, trees, little people and so on.

As the children worked on the buildings for the town, they began to talk about the people who would live there. Sara decided her mansion would be the home of Mr. Dayton, the mayor, and his family. Maria invented Ms. Crabgrass the schoolteacher, as she worked on the school. Their talk was a natural lead-in to the next part of the project, writing up the characters who would populate the town.

Creating characters is central to the creation of an imaginary world. In Evergreen Valley, each child invented and described

one or more characters that they would represent, or act out, for the rest of the project. Sara became the Daytons, and Maria, Ms. Crabgrass, for example.

As they wrote about their characters, the children were bombarded by questions. "Know everything there is to know about your character," I'd tell them. "What size are his feet? What shape is his nose? Who does he live with? What's he most afraid of?" I wanted them to envision each character with a specific personality and a full range of physical traits. The key phrase for this part of the project was, "Think in terms of details!"

As fully-fleshed characters began to emerge from the children's writing, relationships between them developed. Rachel first thought up Evergreen Valley's policewoman, Bertha Smith. Later, in consultation with Sara (alias Mayor Dayton and family), she evolved this character sketch:

> Mrs. Bertha Smith is a stocky woman and very against 'the new movement,' therefore hates Gwendolyn Dayton, who, as Bertha says, '..thinks she's the top of the world.' Even though Bertha absolutely hates Gwendolyn, she is secretly in love with Rupert Dayton, her twin brother. The only problem with this lovely romance is that she is 48 and he is 18."

Another character, a witch, was written up in this way:

> "Millie Dookley lives on Moonshine Mt. in a small but elegant house. She is at war with the Crippble witch. Every month or so she goes down to the town and creates mischief..Her best—and only—friend is Jenny Olson. It is from her that she collects most of her information about the town."

The seeds of stories about the townspeople and their lives with one another have already been planted in these character sketches.

To encourage these stories to grow, a next step can be to set up a post office for the town. A box, a mailman and a delivery time is all that is needed. "Write a letter from your character to any other character in the room. If you're not sure who to

write to, go look over the characters again. They're on the bulletin board." Letters are a natural vehicle for combining play with writing. Everyone loves to get mail.

"Dear Gwendolyn,
Meet me at the river at nine o'clock. I have something very important to tell you.
Yours forever,
Johnny "

"Dear Mayor,
If you don't send me $1000 immediately, I will blow up my volcano and your town will be destroyed.
Signed,
Nippble Crippble Witch"

"Dear Bertha,
I think I know where the mayor has disappeared to. What will you give me if I tell you?
Thomas Mossgrower."

Plots are hatched in the mail, and events and relationships in the town become more and more complex.

When the news gets too involved to keep up with by mail anymore, start a newspaper. The Evergreen Nevergreen News may not go down in journalistic history, but it did make children read and write...and laugh, in Evergreen Valley. Headlines! "The Mayor Is Missing!"

"Mr. F.M. Dayton has been missing for ten days. Poor Mrs. Dayton is frantic. She says that the last time she saw him was at 10:13 on February 4. If you have any information about his whereabouts..."

News break:

"Mayor Dayton reported running out of Evergreen with leaves coming out of his pockets. Don't panic Mrs. Dayton. He was smiling!"

Interview with Wilma Patrick, pet shop owner, on the missing mayor:

"Well, I can't say it is true, but I saw Mayor Dayton wandering around the back of my shop the day before he was found missing. That's where I keep my twenty-six pound cat in the window. He was knocking on the window as I've told him not to. Now that's pretty thick glass, and I'm not saying what I think is true..."

The story line that developed in Evergreen Valley grew from ideas like these in the character sketches, letters, and news items written by the children. One main theme centered around the kidnapping of Mr. Dayton, first reported in the paper. Another theme first came to life in a letter written to the mayor announcing that the Great Late Nothing Terrific Railroad was about to take over Evergreen Valley by right of eminent domain. Both these ideas continued to grow and develop over the course of the project.

Mayor Dayton was eventually ransomed. On his return home, his wife refused to give back the mayoralty and tried to get him hired out as a butler. He became the dogcatcher instead. The Late Great Nothing Terrific Railroad, hatched by two clever parents, was even more successful. The town had to defend itself against the railroad barons. Letters to the editor of the Evergreen News poured in. Town meetings were held to plan strategies and to draft answers to the railroad. Bertha, Gwendolyn, Ms Crabgrass and others gave their opinions. A plan was finally adopted in which the town tried to claim the historical significance of certain buildings on four points: 1) Shakespeare wrote Hamlet there. 2) The constitutional congress met in Evergreen City Hall. 3) George Washington bought boots at the general store. 4) Jefferson's body was lying in the attic of the Evergreen Hotel. With understandable skepticism, the railroad barons announced they were coming to Evergreen to see for themselves. They arrived on the appointed day in black suits, top hats and wigs.

This whole latter part of the project was fascinating to observe because it showed how involved in fantasy play even fifth and sixth graders can become. As the project unfolded,

the children identified more and more with their "town" personae. In these roles, the events in Evergreen Valley became very important to them. Every letter from the railroad was met with real indignation, and it became an urgent matter that the town be saved. By the second half of the project, there were times when the line between reality and fantasy nearly disappeared for some of the children. They showed that same intense involvement in Evergreen Valley as my first class had in their fight against pirates and killer whales.

The goals of the project were to encourage both writing and play. Were they met? Is what I have described here really play? Obviously, this was not pure or "free" play. Certain goals were proposed by the teacher, writing was encouraged, even insisted on, where, if left alone, the children would probably have stuck more to "acting it out." If it was not play in its purest form, however, it had as Götz (1977) suggests, at least "the attitudes and realities characteristic of play:" open-endedness, flexibility, and a content that came from the children. It included, also, some acting out, in the delivery of mail, in town meetings and in special events for which everyone came to school in costume: election day, the town picnic and the meeting with the railroad barons. This was true dramatic or imaginative play in that the children created together an fantasy world in which they lived, briefly, lives other than their own.

As for the writing, it included the character sketches, letters and news articles as well as other aspects of the newspaper..."Dear Blabby," fashion news, a society page, a town census, a natural history column and a poetry contest.

All of the writing grew naturally out of the life of the town. It was motivated by issues that seemed real and important to the children and so was carried out with a great deal of energy and purpose. As far as the class was concerned, the writing was all part of the game.

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